

USNS Comfort

At sea, enroute Baltimore, Md.

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For Immediate Release

"Great Hope" results in Great Comfort

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"I am writing to you in great hope." These are the opening words in a letter from Lithuanian resident Tatjana Tvardauskiene as she asks for help for her son, who has a rare birth defect. USNS Comfort at anchor off Klaipeda, Lithuania, was participating in Baltic Challenge '98, an annual international military exercise involving eleven European nations and the United States.

Writing for her thirteen year old son, Vidmantas, Tatjana, says, "My son was born on December 13, 1984 with a big tumor on the back of his head. Since that day my family and myself live in hope that God will mercy us and will not deprive us of the child."

According to Cmdr. Ross Moquin, the Neurosurgeon aboard Comfort, what Vidmantas has is a "Lipomycolminingocele, or osseous horn" which is a growth which started before Vidmantas was born. This growth pushed out of his skull and continued to grow under his scalp, giving him a horn-like protrusion. Additionally, it caused a permanent tennis ball sized hole in his skull and continued to grow as the boy matured, slowly creating internal pressure and pain. Fortunately this condition is rare, but left untreated can have devastating and life threatening effects.

Tatjana's letter neither begs or pleads, rather she starkly outlines what the entire family has done to seek help for their son. But, between the lines a mother's love is abundantly clear, as is her heart breaking and frustrating fight to save her son. Vidmantas has been hospitalized 14 times. When he was two and again at four years of age, surgery was attempted and some of the growth was removed. But, both times Russian surgeons had to turn back because Vidmantas was losing too much blood.

Since then, doctors from Lithuania to Moscow have offered no encouragement and say they have done all they can. "Perhaps, in America..." they say with a shrug.

The years of care, worry and frustration have led to Tatjana's own failing health. Yet her letter ends with, "My son Vidmantas, though his head is deformed and the defect is visible, lives a happy and cheerful life. We explained to him that the bump on his head is just like glasses, dentures or other things with other people. We taught him to ignore strange glances or words of other people. He still does not realize what is actually wrong with him, that his life is still in danger."

Tatjana dreamed every day, she said, of finding a way to get Vidmantas to America. It was just a dream, because going to America was out of the question. At first, because Lithuania was part of Russia. Then, after independence, it was just too costly.

Monday, July 20, Tatjana read a story in her local newspaper about the American hospital ship Comfort, anchored near Klaipeda. Afraid to hope, she contacted the reporter, asking for more information. After hearing Tatjana's story, the reporter thought it was worth asking the exercise press information center for assistance. Although Comfort had been used only to treat military personnel involved in exercise Baltic Challenge, Tatjana was encouraged to contact the United States Embassy, who worked with the Comfort to expedite the request contained in her letter. Tatjana wrote the letter just as she had written other letters in the past. She knew the wheels of government in the past had worked very slowly, if at all. The ship will be gone, she thought, before she would get an answer and so would her son's chance for a normal life. At 13, he was beginning to experience trouble with his eyes and had constant sinus pain. Thursday the Embassy called. They asked if she and Vidmantas could be in Klaipeda on Friday. The ship was leaving on Saturday, but the doctors would be able to see her son. Tatjana doesn't remember the frantic ride to Klaipeda, but she does remember the ride out to the Comfort.

"On the way out, the little boat rocked so much, and the closer we got to the ship it got bigger and bigger. What a welcome sight."

Like any patients coming aboard Comfort there was no time to prepare themselves for the fast pace of a modern trauma hospital. But for Tatjana and poor Vidmantas they were hurled into what seemed like a maelstrom of activity. First stop was sick bay, where they met Cmdr. Ross Moquin, a Neurosurgeon from the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda Md., President Clinton's hospital. A quick external exam and medical history along with vital signs. Dr. Moquin asked for permission to do a CAT-scan.

Tatjana agreed. The CAT- scan took only a short while and the results where fed into a state of the art telemedicine computer where doctors could not only see the individual X-rays but also a 3-D image of Vidmantas' head in great detail. At the same time these same images were being sent by satellite to the National Naval Medical Center, in Bethesda, Md. where Cmdr. John Stockel, Neurosurgeon on duty, studied them and consulted with Dr. Moquin, and concurring with his diagnosis and surgical plan. Dr. Moquin then spoke with Tatjana, explaining that he could operate and help Vidmantas. He then explained each step of the operation and the risks.

"Do you want me to operate?"

"When?" she asked.

"As soon as we can set it up...now" he replied.

Tatjana's head whirled, for thirteen years she had waited for this moment, only daring to dream that someday it might happen. Now this unknown American doctor, with warmth and confidence, said not only could he help Vidmantas, he wanted to help, and he wanted to do it now. While Tatjana tried to catch her breath and collect her wits, lab tests were ordered for Vidmantas. Within minutes she made her decision.

"Yes. Please, yes," she said.

There were many preparations to make. Dr. Moquin wanted a Lithuanian doctor to participate in the operation because Vidmantas would need follow up care and Dr. Moquin wanted the follow on doctor to know the case from the beginning. Dr. Critksas Vitas, an American-trained Neurosurgeon was available in Klaipeda and readily agreed to help with the operation and do the follow-up care. As soon as he could arrive they would begin.

Vidmantas was understandably frightened. Tatjana stayed by his side, soothing him with her touch and reassuring him in a low voice, as only a mother can. Dr. Moquin and Dr. Vitas bonded quickly, and are ready to begin. The operation is scheduled for six hours. It is a slow and painstaking surgery. Dr. Moquin is guided by views of Vidmantas head on the computer monitor. Growths of this kind have many blood vessels and each one must be sealed. Finally, all the growth is removed leaving a hole that will be filled as the boy's brain resumes its normal shape. Blood that has escaped during the operation is suctioned off and run through a machine that cleans it and returns it to his body. A plastic piece is fitted to cover the hole in his skull. Finally, the scalp is pulled back in place and stitched closed. The entire procedure takes seven

hours but the doctors are satisfied. Saturday morning, Tatjana is again by her son's side. Dr. Moquin wants to keep Vidmantas for a couple of days even though he says the real danger is past. Meanwhile, Comfort prepares to set sail for Visby, Sweden and a medical conference to be held there. Tatjana, and Vidmantas will travel with the ship to Visby before returning to Lithuania. A quest of great hope, covering 13 years and many heartaches, ends in great joy and great "Comfort" aboard an able and willing U.S. Navy hospital ship.